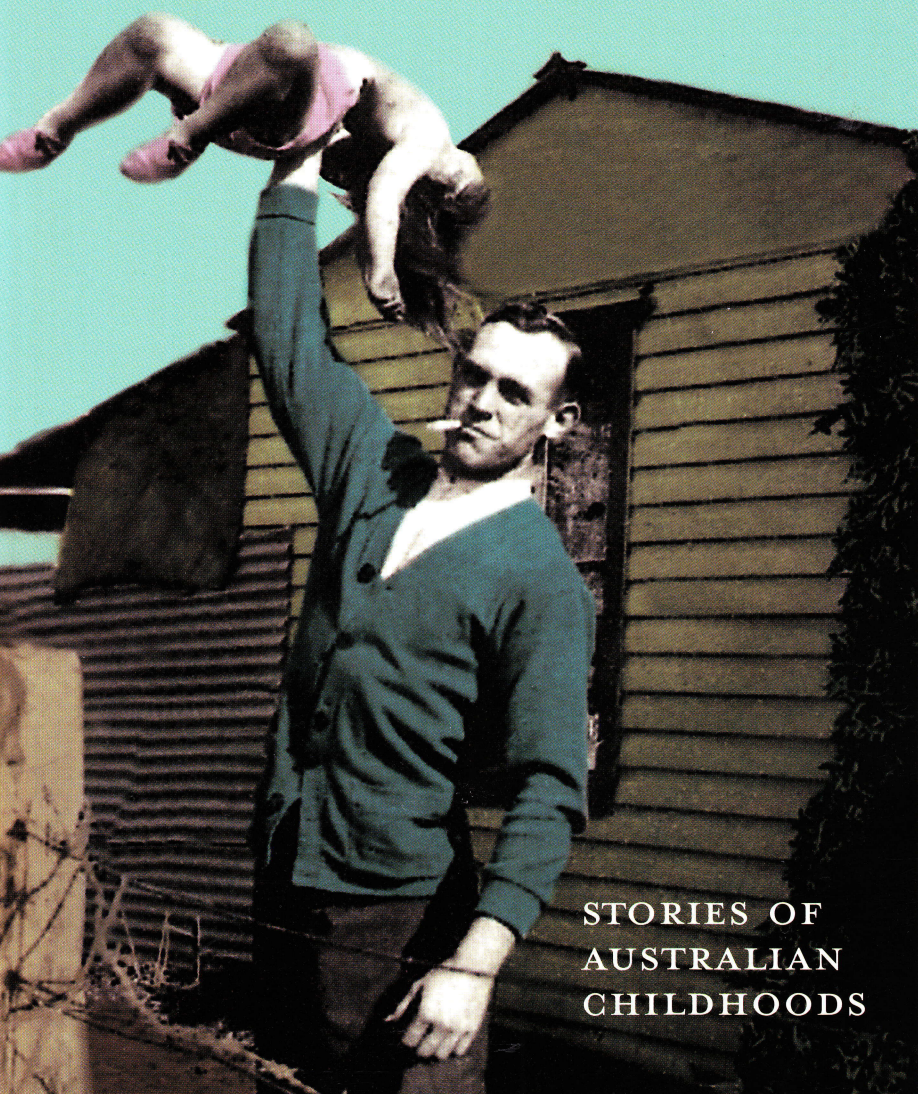


Pamela Bone
UP WE GREW



STORIES OF
AUSTRALIAN
CHILDHOODS



'I cannot readily and easily remember my mother's face,' says Norman Lacy. 'I remember particular things about her, but when I try to conjure her image I see an outline of her body, and of her head, but I cannot see her face. I seem to have blocked out the memory of her face.'

But Norman can remember with absolute clarity, and could take me to it right now, he says, the exact place on the footpath outside the Lincoln Hotel in Church Street, Richmond, where when he was fourteen, his brother, who

was four years older, said to him: 'You know Mum is going to die, don't you?'

And he can see in his mind the shop his father sent him and his brother to, the day after his mother's death – 'I suspect we walked along, not saying a word to each other' – to buy a black tie each for her funeral.

The bleakness of that shopping excursion, the inability of the brothers to communicate their grief to each other, is unbearable to think of.



Norman Lacy, former Victorian Arts Minister, former college lecturer, former Anglican vicar, former Richmond plumber, was born in October 1941 in Richmond. After his birth his mother had severe post-natal depression, and when he was a few weeks old he was sent to live with an aunt for six months. His mother suffered it again when his sister was born five years later, and he again went to live with Aunt Dorrie, in Preston.

His father was a self-employed plumber. A.H. Lacy Brothers, Plumbers, was a respected business in Richmond. Like most people in business in Richmond in those days, his father had to put 10 pounds in the top drawer of the Richmond City Council's town clerk if he wanted to get something through, like permission to put a pipe in some road.

Both Norman's parents grew up in Richmond, although his father had been born in South Africa and came to Australia with his parents as a young boy, around the time of the Boer War.

Norman's mother was religious and civic-minded. Her

family had lived closer to Richmond Hill, and didn't consider themselves working class, as his father's family definitely was. Richmond in his father's youth was mostly working class. The 1930s depression had hit the suburb hard: 28 per cent of men were unemployed, and families who couldn't pay the rent were evicted. Houses were tiny, weatherboard, four roomed, built right up to the front fence, and luxuries such as a bathroom were rare.

Things were getting a bit better for most people in Richmond by the time Norman was born. And his family was considerably better off financially than most. Because of the war, the plumbing business was growing. It was contracted to lay concrete and plumbing for American servicemen's camps around Melbourne, which meant his father was not required to enlist.

The family moved into a much bigger, better house in Church Street. It had been a private hospital, and was a big, bluestone, Edwardian house on two blocks, one of which is now occupied by the office of Newman's Chocolates.

When Norman was a boy that second block was empty, and had on it a fig tree that rats used to climb, which he could shoot with a shanghai from his bedroom window. He was working class, but knew he was not typical. Most of his mates lived in the working men's cottages, long since demolished to make way for high-rise Housing Commission flats.

'My mates used to look at our house with awe. It had eight or nine rooms, a billiard table. Compared to theirs it was a mansion.'

Yet even though his parents were better off and he lived in a bigger house, his life and his expectations were no different from his friends. He went to North Richmond primary school, now called Yarra Primary School, in

Davidson Street. He swam with his mates in the Yarra River, walking across the railway bridges to the swimming spots on the South Yarra side. 'We always knew the other side of the river was where the rich people lived,' Norman said. 'The highest aspiration of anyone in Richmond then was to get into a trade. There was no high school in Richmond: there was never any question that boys in Richmond would go to any school other than Richmond Tech. I always knew that was what I was to do.'

His father was a calm, kind man but he drank too much. (Didn't everyone's in those days?) It caused some conflict. 'The hotels closed at 6.15, but the bowling club kept serving beer until eight, and he would get home half stung.'

'There's the hotel I had to drag my father, and grandfather, out of,' says Norman, as we drive around Richmond's streets.



Even so, until the illness came it was a happy childhood. Norman went to Sunday school, was taught to say his prayers, to be a good citizen. His father took him camping, and shooting rabbits and mushrooming, and Norman looked up to him. His father was a good sportsman, played tennis at the St Ignatius Church club, was the secretary of the Richmond Union Bowling Club, and played first-grade cricket at Como Park, across the river in South Yarra.

When Norman's mother was forty-four she died of cancer, after many years of illness and two mastectomy operations. Norman's brother told him, about three months before she died, that their mother was not going to get better.

'He was nineteen, I was fourteen, and he had to be the one to tell me. My father didn't ever talk about it to me... Men don't talk about these things – it was a very difficult time.

'I sensed, on the day it happened, that it was going to happen. My mother was in her bedroom. I was supposed to go to school, but I just refused to go. I knew.

'I suppose I didn't feel prepared – it so affected me that I think I had no consideration of how it affected other people in my family. I never talked to my brother and sister about it.'

After Norman's mother died, his grandparents moved in. Norman remembers his grandmother, who was of Dutch descent, as 'an aggressive, unattractive, Boer kind of person'. His grandfather, like his father, was a plumber. This period when his grandparents lived with them was not a happy time.

Anything rather than stay home, Norman threw himself into sport. He spent hours and hours basketball training, and became the captain of the Victorian under-16-year-old basketball team.

He left school at fifteen and took up a plumbing apprenticeship. When he was eighteen, and his mother had been dead for four years, the American evangelist preacher Billy Graham came to Melbourne, drawing crowds of hundreds of thousands to the Melbourne Cricket Ground. Norman was one in the crowd.

'I suppose today you would say I had a born-again experience,' he said. He decided then to go into the church ministry.

Then, when Norman was nineteen his father died too, of a heart attack. If you could say he was resilient, it probably

came, he says, from knowing at the age of nineteen, with both parents dead, that he was alone in the world.



Norman left the plumbing job and went to theological college, passed his Leaving Certificate, spent the money he'd inherited from his father on getting a theology degree, became vicar of St John's Church in Healesville, spent nine years altogether in the Anglican Ministry. While studying for his theology degree he lived in Ridley College, in Parkville, surrounded by leafy gardens, with students who had been to private schools, listening to classical music.

'As kids we were conscious that we were working class, that it was the people on the other side of the river that were wealthy. It was like crossing to the other side'.

Norman's parents had passed on good values to him. And his involvement with sport had probably saved him getting caught up with the street gangs – 'seriously rough kids' – that were so much a part of the inner city culture in the 1940s and 50s. Now, he discovered a love of classical music, and bought his first records, and never went back.

Norman joined the Liberal Party, and in 1973 he stood for the seat of Ringwood. The government of Rupert Hamer was elected with a solid majority. Six years later Norman was appointed Arts and Educational Services Minister. But he would not, he said, have joined the Liberal Party led by Henry Bolte (a former long-serving, very hard-line Victorian premier).

He was among those who stood outside Pentridge Prison – he in his vicar's dog-collar – in the crowd protesting

against the hanging of Ronald Ryan. When he spoke in parliament in support of the bill to abolish capital punishment in Victoria, eight Labor members crossed the floor to congratulate him.

